

## Article

# Antifeminist and “Truly Liberated”: Conservative Performances of Gender by Women Politicians in Hungary and Romania

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## Abstract

This article employs a two-level analysis to compare the discursive performance of gender on social media in Hungary and Romania; the two countries with the lowest percentage of women in politics in the European Union (EU). First, by revealing the tension between conservative views about gender roles, and social and political specificities in the two countries, the research illustrates how various parties on the conservative right ideological continuum—from the center-right to right-wing populism—relate to the feminist project. Secondly, it analyzes how selected women politicians within this continuum negotiate their ideological beliefs about gender roles with their political career interests, by means of social media (Facebook). The analytical constructs of idealized motherhood and feminine toughness are employed to examine a period of intensive political campaigning in 2014 in both Hungary and Romania. The study triangulates the multi-layered discursive circumstances (the historical, contextual, and social media contexts) in Hungary and Romania, and maps out the similarities and differences that are disclosed when comparing the selected women politicians. The article makes a significant theoretical and empirical contribution to scholarship on gender and conservatism in particular and raises questions for the wider study of gender, politics, and social media in general.

## Keywords

conservatism; Eastern Europe; Facebook; feminism; gender; ideological continuum; politics; right-wing populism; social media; women

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

This study contributes to the emerging scholarship on the conservative opposition to, or reinterpretation of, the feminist project (Celis & Childs, 2011; Celis & Erzeel, 2015; Childs & Webb, 2012; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Verloo, 2018). It examines how women’s issues and women’s interests are expressed along a conservative right continuum, encompassing a trajectory from center-right parties to right-wing populist parties that subscribe to a socially conservative political agenda. The article expands the focus of previous studies on gender and conservatism, which tend to privilege US- and Western-centered perspectives—such as the special issue *Gender*

*and Conservatism*, edited by Celis and Childs (2018)—by focusing on Hungary and Romania, which stand out in the European Union (EU) for having the lowest levels of women’s political participation in their respective national parliaments. In 2014, the newly elected Hungarian National Assembly registered 10.1% women members of parliament (MPs); in turn, in both Romanian Houses of Parliament there were approximately 11.5% women MPs. It is noteworthy in this context, that among the fourteen candidates in the 2014 Romanian Presidential elections, the two women both had conservative right backgrounds. Neither qualified for the runoff. In the EU Parliament elections organized the same year, the percentage of women members from Hungary and

Romania elected to as MEPs was somewhat better, albeit significantly below the European average: 19% in Hungary, 28% in Romania. Concerning elections, especially after Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential election in the United States, it was acknowledged that social media had become a significant platform for political campaigns, particularly Facebook. Unlike traditional media, Facebook encourages more personalized political performances on behalf of the candidates, and stimulates engagement between politicians and potential voters. These developments are not limited to the US and Western Europe (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Kalsnes, 2016). Indeed, campaigning through Facebook has been promptly embraced by both male and female politicians in Eastern Europe as well (Băluță, 2015; Bene, 2017). The article thus answers appeals for studies that contextualize how leading conservative politicians have shaped the gender equality agenda (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015, pp. 172–173), providing an Eastern European perspective, and for additional analyses of the relationship between politics, gender, and social media (Sandberg & Öhlberg, 2017, p. 327).

The research questions are: *What form(s) does the conservative opposition to, or reinterpretation of, the feminist project in Hungary and Romania take? How do conservative right women politicians in these countries negotiate their ideological beliefs about gender roles with their political career interests?* In considering these, the article provides a two-level analysis: first, the conservative right continuum is examined in both Hungary and Romania; secondly, the social media campaigns of four established women politicians (two from each country) who are situated along this ideological continuum are analyzed. The article is organized in six sections. First, the conceptual basis to the theoretical framework of the study is articulated. Secondly, the methodology which underpins the two-level analysis is outlined. Thirdly, the historical context of the conservative right continuum in the two countries is critically analyzed. Fourthly, the context of situation is utilized to examine the careers of selected women politicians. Fifthly, the discursive performance of gender is analyzed in the social media political campaigning of the successive elections in 2014. Finally, the conclusion suggests ways in which the study contributes to the field and indicates potential avenues for further research.

## 2. Conceptual Articulations

I suggest the concept of *conservative right continuum* to describe the ideological space occupied by center-right parties, often labelled “New Right” in the US and Western Europe, which fuse new conceptions of social conservatism with neoliberal economic dogma (Childs & Webb, 2012, p. 28; Schreiber, 2016, p. 7), as well as right-wing populist parties, which combine nostalgic welfare chauvinism with cultural conservatism in nativist clothing—supposedly defending the native ethnic majority

from harmful, and polluting external influences (Mudde, 2016, p. 4). The common denominator of this ideological continuum is the constitutive parties’ position towards the feminist project, emphasizing the “natural” basis of the heterosexual nuclear family, and not least its biological unity (Celis & Childs, 2018; Childs & Webb, 2012; Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Schreiber, 2016; Wodak, 2015). The conservative understanding of a “traditional family” is often juxtaposed against perceived degeneracy and state dependency in contemporary society (Childs & Webb, 2012, p. 28; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017, p. 6), and it is consequently weaponized against the state’s economic meddling and attempts to promote gender (and sexual) equality. In other words, under the neoliberal imperative to “roll back the state” (Walby, 2015, p. 172), the heterosexual nuclear family emerges as “the ideal setting to ensure the reproduction of a disciplined working force, to stimulate and regulate consumerist identifications, and to provide for childcare and social security” (Norocel, 2013, p. 163), whereby women and men are constituted “as different, albeit complementary, sexes, with accompanying sex specific gender roles” (Childs & Webb, 2012, p. 9).

### 2.1. Conservative Conceptions of Women in Politics

Such complementarity between men and women rests on an inherent gender hierarchy that is “theologically and/or biologically derived and should be the basis for women’s pride and social status” (Schreiber, 2016, p. 2). Consequently, women are accepted in politics insofar as they embody two overlapping ideals: the elevated maternal image, cementing the gender hierarchy within the family unit whereby the acts of childbearing and childrearing are performed; and that of a woman with a strong professional background, though in this case espousing opposition to feminism is, at least nominally, imperative (Gibson & Heyse, 2010, pp. 251–253; Klien & Farrar, 2009, p. 75; Meret, 2015, pp. 94–97). *Motherhood*, symbolically connected to the cultic image of Virgin Mary (Petö, 2010), is performed in the conservative context in intimate connection to such values as nurturance, empathy, and community, which are deemed to exclusively belong to the “feminine repertoire”; its corresponding masculine ideal of the warrior-hero, the bread-winning family father, or the rugged pioneer is tacitly endorsed (Gibson & Heyse, 2010, p. 253). Women’s performance of their motherhood in politics is accepted provided they do not seek political power in itself; rather, they may seek office from compassion, given they balance work and family responsibilities, and ensure their “husband’s blessing (and participation in domestic life)” (Schreiber, 2016, p. 16). Motherhood as one’s defining political performance is nonetheless confining women to a position of simple appendages to their family, and eventually ushers them back into the safety of their family homes. This notwithstanding, right-wing populist female leaders synthesize “the role of woman not only as

a mother and wife at home because of her natural reproductive abilities, but also not shaped by ‘radical’ views on gender and gender equality” (Meret, 2015, p. 96). Claiming to defend conservative family values, they employ motherhood instrumentally to position themselves as nurturing and protecting “their people”, thereby justifying strict and dominant female party leadership (Meret, 2015, p. 101). In this regard, while inherently contradictory, the ideal of professional woman, or feminine toughness, presents itself with a greater potential. The conservative women who adopt it follow a dress-code that acknowledges their ascribed gender difference from their male fellows with whom they openly compete for political power. “However, while they are being praised for their femininity, they are also touted for being tough and aggressive” (Schreiber, 2016, p. 8). On the conservative right continuum, these women come to represent the “truly liberated women”, as opposed to the allegedly “self-serving and hypocritical” feminists, encapsulating in one performance both the endeavors “to reinscribe traditional gender roles”, and the efforts to disrupt the very roles they supposedly embody; such proclaimed liberation “also serves to cast feminists as being out of touch, while reinforcing the unfounded stereotype of feminists as unfeminine” (Schreiber, 2016, pp. 11–12).

## 2.2. Women, Politics, and Facebook

To enter politics and legitimize their presence in a sphere traditionally dominated by men, women have “developed particular patterns of expressions based largely on the articulation of lived experiences, often moving beyond abstract intellect to embrace the concrete, the emotional, the inclusive, and the personal through narrative” (Klien & Farrar, 2009, p. 66). Facebook proves an excellent additional medium for women politicians to make use of these discursive patterns. Establishing “oneself as the spokesperson of an...underrepresented group (such as women) becomes easier without gatekeepers, and Facebook, in particular, can facilitate such a strategy” (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 41). Indeed, Facebook is a particularly potent social media platform that enables politicians to present their personal interests, their political biographies, and craft a closer relationship with their potential voters, based upon issues which are generally toned down, or very difficult to achieve through traditional media (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, pp. 20–22; Sandberg & Öhlberg, 2017, pp. 315–316; Savulescu & Vitelar, 2012, pp. 10–11). This is enabled by the inherent nature of communication on Facebook (i.e., posting various updates on the personal profile, liking, or commenting on other people’s posts), which emphasizes agency and self-representation. Put another way, Facebook supports the “reification of self though public performance”; it enables the re-presentation of specific aspects of one’s identity—here gender roles and other normative influences are very important—, which are deemed desirable and incarnate “an idea of who one wants to be, in-

cluding incipient aspects of personal identity that users want to cultivate”, and which otherwise “might be inhibited in the off-line world” (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008, pp. 450–452). The feedback from other Facebook users serves as a kind of “social verification”, and bestows the identity performance with “social legitimacy”. This posits a serious challenge for politicians, since there is an “inherent tension between the expectation for professionalism, and the need to craft a more personalized and intimate display, aiming for a quasi-total transparency, in the politician’s performative on their social media profiles” (Savulescu & Vitelar, 2012, pp. 17–18).

## 2.3. Facebook Use by Conservative Women

The present study aims to connect these two research areas, and contribute to the emerging field of gender, politics, and social media. Theoretically, the article aims to map out how the tensions between ideological constraints about gender roles specific to the conservative right continuum, and women’s empowerment in politics, are ironed out by means of social media, which enables conservative women to pursue their political career interests while reinterpreting or opposing outright the feminist project. Empirically, it draws on evidence from both the East European historical context (the specificities of Hungarian and Romanian politics concerning women), whilst also providing a snapshot of the situational context (women’s participation in the 2014 long election year) in which four women with a political background on the conservative right continuum perform unmediated and “truer” selves on Facebook.

## 3. Methodological Notes

I make use of a modified set of tools inspired by the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), to discern in the collected empirics discursive performances of gender (Butler, 1993). DHA entails a *retroductable* investigation (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 3): since no hypotheses are formulated/tested in the study, the analysis must be transparent, the interpretations justified, and the value positions made explicit. Discourse in this respect is understood as a “cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices” that are in equal measure “socially constituted and socially constitutive”, and “related to a macro-topic”, although discourse is “not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). The DHA aims to analyze “texts—be they audio, spoken, visual and/or written—as they relate to structured knowledge (*discourses*), [which] must be viewed in terms of their *situatedness*” (Wodak, 2015, p. 51, italics in original). The DHA follows the *principle of triangulation* that positions the analyzed discourse in a multi-layered context, which first sheds light on the “broader sociopo-

litical and historical context” that the discourse is embedded in, and then accounts for the “extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames” of the specific “context of situation”, in which the empirical material was collected (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 93). Using primary (party manifestoes, policy proposals, etc.) and secondary sources, the first two stages of triangulation are explicit in the Eastern European specificity, thus positioning this study in the wider framework of analyses of conservatism and gender.

Use is also made of *discursive performances of gender*, whereby performativity is “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). These citational practices may be either compliant with, or disruptive of the heterosexual norm, revealing that gender, in the context of discourse, “is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but regulate various bodily beings” (Butler, 1993, p. x). With reference to the matter at hand, the discursive performance of gender is employed to analyze Facebook posts, thereby exposing the reiterative and citational practices, which on social media produce the gendered identity of women politicians on the conservative right continuum within the ideologically sanctioned boundaries thereof. Put simply, and aware that Facebook allows account-owners to later modify, even delete their posts or accompanying comments, I argue that what these women politicians have left after such a politically intense year as 2014, documents how successive posts produced their discursive performance of gender, and that these practices are embedded in the wider historical context of discourse that DHA triangulation unveils.

The selected women politicians are Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz and Dóra Dúró in Hungary, and Elena Udrea and Monica Macovei in Romania, respectively. They represent various forces along the conservative right continuum: from center-right parties (PMP, M10), to radicalized center-right parties (FIDESZ), and right-wing populist parties (JOBBIK) (see Table 1). In addition, they occupy powerful positions both in their own parties, and in national (Dúró, Udrea), or European politics (Gáll-Pelcz, Macovei).

The chosen timeframe stretched from January 1 to December 31, 2014, and the empirical material gathered illustrated several fields of political action (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 91): national and European elections, as well as day-to-day activities aimed at consolidating public attitudes towards the party’s political agenda. These observations needed to be corroborated with previous findings in the field, which indicated that such a timeframe accounted for the different opportunities that Facebook provides: intensive scrutiny by traditional media, supplemented by the candidates’ social media presence during national elections; the candidates’ efforts to profile themselves in so-called second order elections such as those for the EU Parliament, which generally yields less attention from the traditional media; and the long-term construction of a distinctive political profile (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, pp. 38–39). Following the ethical guidelines for Internet research (Association of Internet Researchers, 2002, 2012), the web application *Facebook loader* (University of Oslo, 2013) was used to extract the posts and comments from their public Facebook pages<sup>1</sup>, and to study various types of interaction, such as Likes, Shares, and Comments (Kalsnes, 2016, pp. 3–4).

First, a total of 1998 posts were collected; the overwhelming majority belonging to the Romanian politicians (see Table 1). A possible explanation for this may be that the two Romanian politicians participated in campaigning for both the EU Parliament elections, as well as subsequent Presidential elections. Macovei’s posts are twice as numerous as Udrea’s, but this may be a result of Macovei running as an independent presidential candidate, and thus more reliant on social media than traditional media for reaching out to potential supporters. Similarly, Gáll-Pelcz’s reduced presence may be explained by the significant campaign that FIDESZ pushed through conventional channels for all candidates.

Second, the collected posts were systematized thematically: experiences of maternity and family issues (*motherhood*), and those concerning the challenges of women’s engagement in politics (*feminine toughness*)—see Table 1. These posts were scattered during the entire selected period and received a varied amount of attention. For example, Gáll-Pelcz gathered at most

**Table 1.** Facebook activity of selected women politicians.

Politicians	Party	Facebook profile	Total posts in 2014	Total thematic posts
Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz	FIDESZ	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/">https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/</a>	166	18
Dóra Dúró	JOBBIK	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/durodora/">https://www.facebook.com/durodora/</a>	205	57
Elena Udrea	PDL/PMP	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/">https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/</a>	506	96
Monica Macovei	PDL/M10	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/">https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/</a>	1121	85

<sup>1</sup> This was undertaken in April-May 2016, and cross-checked in April 2017, to ensure that the analyzed posts have not been altered/deleted in the meanwhile.

1239 likes (with a maximum of 1456 likes for a post that year); Dúró received 4062 likes (the most likes for any of her posts in 2014); Udrea had 15923 likes (with maximum 26817 likes for a post in 2014); while Macovei received 16871 likes (with maximum 19720 likes). This indicates that the posts fulfilling these criteria received the same amount of attention as other posts, therefore playing an important role in contouring the political self that these women perform on Facebook.

#### 4. The Historical Context

In Hungary, the political parties on the conservative right continuum share an opposition to feminism, and place a strong emphasis on normative heterosexuality, particularly the “cult of motherhood” (Félix, 2017; Pető, 2010; Szikra, 2014). In the conservative discourses, the demographic problems faced by Hungary are attributed to the previous “austerity regime of the left-liberal camp—plus the pervasiveness of liberalism in individualism and personal freedom. Therefore, the political elements of liberalization appear to threaten the family as much as the economic ones, while the politics of gender and reproduction reconstitute political camps” (Korkut, 2012, p. 175). As such, politics concerning women’s rights are assimilated to “family politics, which covers the social role of women by models offered by the cult of [Virgin] Mary”, which implicitly posits women’s choice to withstand motherhood as “‘national’ sabotage” (Pető, 2010, p. 196).

Of great significance to the political context, was the ideological transition of the Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ), from a previously liberal anti-Communist stance, to one locating itself firmly on the conservative right continuum (Egedy, 2009, pp. 47–48; Korkut, 2012, p. 19; Montgomery, 2015, p. 230). It is argued that while FIDESZ “share elements with other populist and/or right-wing parties in the [region], it follows a multifarious conservative ideology” (Korkut, 2012, p. 168), based on “exclusionary national identity and populism” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 228), in the sense that the party underwent an “adjustment of self-identity...that in time accommodated Christianity, moral revolution, entrepreneurship, and finally family” (Korkut, 2012, p. 165). FIDESZ consolidated its position as the major conservative right political force, defining itself not only “as the guardian and agent of order and moral progressions”, but also looking upon “itself

as the protector and rescuer of Hungarian society, fulfilling its mission in harmony with the moral demands of the cosmic world order” (Egedy, 2009, p. 49). Taking advantage of the political implosion of the center-left, FIDESZ continued its collaboration with the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP) and cemented its grip onto power in the 2014 Hungarian Parliament elections (see Table 2). The two parties had won the previous elections with a two thirds majority, which allowed them to draft and adopt a new constitution without much opposition (Montgomery, 2015, p. 231). Importantly, the new Hungarian Constitution (2011) narrowly defines the family to be based on “the marriage between a man and a woman”, thereby refusing the same legal rights to same-sex couples and discriminating against “thousands of heterosexual cohabiting couples and their children” (Szikra, 2014, p. 494). The main campaign message in the 2014 EU Parliament elections the same year centered on identity issues, delimiting the “us” (Hungarians) from “Brussels” (a colloquial term, referring to the EU institutions, and the set of norms and values FIDESZ intended to protect Hungarians from being forced to adopt); in this struggle, the center-left opposition were swiftly depicted as mere “incompetent actors” (Koller, 2017, p. 174). Such vocal opposition against the EU is surprising, given that in the EU Parliament FIDESZ is affiliated to the European People’s Party (EPP), the largest political force that gathers Christian Democratic and other conservative parties with a nominally center-right political perspective, and that Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz is among the Parliament’s acting Vice-Presidents.

The other political force on the conservative right continuum of interest here is the right-wing populist Movement for a Better Hungary (JOBBIK). Although in a position of relative ideological proximity to FIDESZ, JOBBIK espouses a type of social conservatism wrapped aggressively in ethnic-based nativism, which proclaims “the homogeneous people as ‘national-minded ethnic Hungarians’, a category that assumes Christianity and excludes a large range of other groups, including Roma, Jews, Communists and ex-Communists, urbanist intellectuals and journalists, feminists, homosexuals and politicians who espouse pro-EU, pro-mondialist or neoliberal views” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 233). Different in tone rather than focus from FIDESZ, JOBBIK declare their concern about the demographic crisis Hungary is facing; their solution is to indicate the mothering of ethnically pure Hungarian offspring as “women’s primary citizen-

**Table 2.** Elections in Hungary (2010–2014).

Party \ Year	National Parliamentary elections, in % (and MPs)		EU Parliament elections in % (and MEPs)
	2010 (386)	2014 (only 199)	2014 (21)
FIDESZ + KDNP	52.7 (227 + 26)	44.9 (117 + 16)	51.5 (11 + 1)
JOBBIK	16.7 (21)	20.2 (23)	14.7 (3)



ship value” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 233). This is to be achieved through a combination of measures, from a total ban on abortions, strengthening the role of family and encouraging “responsibly conceived children” among the ethnic Hungarians, to discouraging the perceived excessive nativity of Roma minority, or what JOBBIK disparagingly labelled “Gypsy breeding (*cigánytenyészet*) maintained by state funds” (Korkut, 2012, p. 190). In the EU Parliament JOBBIK were deemed too extreme by other right-wing populist parties; their three MEPs are among the Non-Attached Members.

In Romania, support for women’s access to politics and women’s issues has generally been fluid, conjectural, and punctual, rather than programmatic, and played out against a backdrop of tacit misogyny masquerading as an emphasis on traditional family values (Băluță, 2015; Miroiu, 2015). The conservative discourses mix such arguments as “being European”, or “adhering to European values” with appeals to enrich politics with “feminine beauty”, and sometimes even resort to religion to legitimize women’s participation in politics—as God created both men and women. This notwithstanding, feminism and the non-traditional and emancipatory ideals it promotes have been strongly rejected as antinational and outright unnatural (Norocel, 2016, p. 250), women have generally been relegated to a narrowly functionalist role, selflessly sacrificing themselves for the wellbeing of others, both as mothers and wives at home, and as colleagues at work. In addition, like in the US and the rest of Europe (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), some vociferous pro-life movements have emerged, with shifting political anchorage and close ties to religious conservative groups, and whose existence reflects the fading public memory about the draconic anti-abortion laws during the Ceaușescu dictatorship (Miroiu, 2015, p. 99).

The conservative right continuum in Romania is more fragmented, and more dynamic, than in Hungary (Cinpoș, 2015, p. 113). There are however certain conservative parties that have shaped Romanian politics (see Table 3). Much like FIDESZ in Hungary, the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), had a sinuous ideological development under the guardianship of Traian Băsescu, espe-

cially during his two consecutive presidential mandates (2004–2014). Founded in 2008 through the merger of center-left with center-right parties, PDL eventually consolidated their position as the main conservative right political force. Although acknowledging the persistent inequalities between women and men in Romania, PDL actively opposed feminism. Often described derogatorily as the “feminist-Marxist amalgam” that encourages a “contraceptive ethos”, PDL argued that women’s primary duty when entering politics is to represent the interest of women and mothers that are resisting these challenges (Iancu, 2012, pp. 159–160). During its time in government between 2008 and 2012, PDL translated the previous discursive polarization, one that centered on the topic of Communist legacy, into one that challenged the future of welfare services. This shift led to the effective marginalization, demonization, and delegitimization of entire social segments, particularly the pauper Roma minority (Cinpoș, 2015, p. 114). The austerity measures in the aftermath of 2008 financial crisis were clearly gendered. The salary cuts disproportionately affected feminized sectors—education, healthcare, and public administration—while the burden of rolling back the already insufficient welfare services was implicitly assumed to be borne by women within the family (Iancu, 2012, p. 160). In the wake of the 2014 EU parliament elections, and as Băsescu was concluding his last presidential mandate, PDL entered a period of turmoil and crafted a political alliance with their previous opponents, the National Liberal Party (PNL). In July that year, the two parties announced their merger under the name PNL, although decided to maintain PDL’s conservative right affiliation to EPP in the EU Parliament. In the 2014 Presidential elections, they jointly supported Klaus Iohannis, whose campaign centered on an intolerance to corruption and a strongly anti-welfare discourse. This enabled him to insinuate pervasive corruption to his center-left competitor, and reject most notions of social equality and justice that underpinned the welfare system (Cinpoș, 2015, pp. 109–111). Qualifying for the runoff, Iohannis’ anti-corruption and conservative platform resonated with most candidates on the conserva-

**Table 3.** Elections in Romania (2012–2016).

Party	National Parliamentary elections, in % (and MPs), both Chambers		Presidential elections, Candidate (%), first round	EU Parliament elections in % (and MEPs)
	2012 (588)	2016 (466)	2014	2014 (32)
PNL	58.6 <sup>a</sup> (150)	20.4 <sup>c</sup> (99)	Klaus Iohannis <sup>d</sup> (30.4)	15 (6)
PDL	16.5 <sup>b</sup> (74)			12.2 (5-1 <sup>e</sup> )
PMP	—	5.7 (26)	Elena Udrea (5.2)	6.2 (2)
M10	—	—	Monica Macovei (4.4)	(1 <sup>e</sup> )

Notes: <sup>a</sup> % USL electoral alliance; <sup>b</sup> % ARD electoral alliance; <sup>c</sup> PNL and PDL merged as PNL; <sup>d</sup> qualified to, and won, the runoff; <sup>e</sup> Macovei left PDL—-independent MEP.

tive right continuum and was eventually endorsed formally by their majority.

The People's Movement Party (PMP) are a splinter from PDL, that arose when the faction supported by then-President Bănescu, lost the internal elections and opted to form a new party in early 2014. Under the leadership of Elena Udrea, and despite open support from Bănescu, PMP hovered at around 5% in the elections. The two MEPs that PMP secured in the EU Parliament elections joined EPP as well. PMP supported Udrea as a candidate in the presidential elections that year. M10 are another, even smaller splinter from PDL, gathered around Monica Macovei who left PDL after having renewed her MEP mandate on their list; she later contested the Presidential elections as an independent candidate. Ideologically, both these parties embrace various strains of conservatism. It is worth noting, however, that all Romanian parties on the conservative right continuum are to varying degrees positive about the European project, which tends to be discursively internalized to bolster their anti-Communist and neoliberal anti-welfare credentials.

## 5. The Context of Situation

The *context of situation* is represented by the intense political activity during several electoral campaigns throughout 2014: the Hungarian Parliament elections (April 6); the EU Parliament elections (May 25, in both countries); and the first round of the Romanian Presidential elections (November 2). For the elections taking place in 2014, it seems that social media, particularly Facebook, became an important addition to traditional campaigning in both countries. The Facebook platform enabled politicians to adopt a more colloquial style, and switch the focus onto consolidating their relationship with supporters by exploiting the superficial presentation of political issues as perceptibly non-political, emotional and familiar topics (Bene, 2017, p. 526; Tasențe, 2015, p. 93). A few explanations about the networking infrastructure in each country are necessary here. In 2014, some 76.1% of the population in Hungary (Internet Live Stats, 2016a) had access to Internet, while 54.1% were connected in Romania (Internet Live Stats, 2016b). Concerning social media usage that year, some 38.89% in Hungary (Statista, 2017a), respectively 24.24% of the total population in Romania (Statista, 2017b) had a Facebook profile.

### 5.1. Conservative Women in Hungarian Politics

Despite holding prominent positions, the political activities of Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz and Dóra Dúró have been hardly researched (Hajdú, 2014; Róna, 2016). Gáll-Pelcz (née Gáll, born 1962) has considerable political experience, gleaned from holding various high-profile positions both nationally and at EU level. She is married, with three children. In 2003 Gáll-Pelcz joined FIDESZ, apparently hand-picked by its chair Viktor Orbán, and quickly climbed

the internal hierarchy becoming vice-chair in 2005. In the 2006 Hungarian Parliament elections, she won her first MP mandate; towards the end of the mandate she served as Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly. In the 2010 elections, she had her seat confirmed in the National Assembly, but soon thereafter she replaced Pál Schmitt as MEP in Brussels, joining EPP. Gáll-Pelcz chaired FIDESZ women's chapter (2004–2014). Indeed, her political profile is centered on women's and family issues, oftentimes speaking at conferences dedicated to women's issues. She campaigned in 2014 for new policy measures on childcare aimed at supporting parents wishing to join the labor market. In the 2014 EU Parliament elections, she renewed her MEP mandate, and was elected one of the EU Parliament's Vice-Presidents.

Notwithstanding her young age, Dúró (born 1987) also has a depth of political experience. She started her political career in 2006 by joining JOBBIK. She was first elected MP in 2010 as the youngest member of the National Assembly, one of only three women JOBBIK MPs (Hajdú, 2014, p. 67). She was re-elected in the 2014 Hungarian Parliament elections and chaired the Standing Committee on Culture (2014–2018), which deals with matters of culture, education, and media. She was also member of the subcommittee on Women's Dignity (2015–2018). The party was present in all aspects of her life, having married former JOBBIK deputy-chair Előd Novák with whom she has three children. Dúró declared her motto to be "In the womb lives the nation!" (Neményi, 2015).

### 5.2. Conservative Women in Romanian Politics

Reflecting on Elena Udrea's and Monica Macovei's rise to political prominence reveals several studies analyzing their political activity, either individually or in the wider political context (Băluță, 2015; Branea, 2017; Miroiu, 2015; Savulescu & Vitelar, 2012). Both Udrea and Macovei were initially connected to PDL and benefited at various stages in their political careers from the support of then-President Bănescu. Udrea (born 1973) is often described as a negative example for how women succeed in politics—her political career being the result of an alleged intimate relationship with Bănescu (Norocel, 2016, p. 259). She entered politics in 2004, having been elected in the Bucharest city council on a PNL ticket, but in early 2006 she followed Bănescu to the precursor of conservative PDL, becoming vice-chair shortly thereafter. She won two consecutive MP mandates in 2008 and 2012. She held the portfolio of Tourism, and then that of Regional Development and Tourism (2008–2012). In 2014, Udrea joined Bănescu's PDL breakup wing, and was elected chair of the newly founded PMP. She participated actively in the EU Parliament elections, and later that year was the PMP presidential candidate. In the first round of Presidential elections, Udrea came in fourth with 5.2% (see Table 3); in the runoff she announced her support for the conservative candidate Johannis (Miroiu,

2015, p. 101). Udrea divorced her husband in 2013 and has no children. She used her good-looks to consolidate a political profile often courting controversy, not only appearing in a rubber dress and thigh-high boots on the cover of a women's glossy magazine, or parachute-jumping in the eve of the EU Parliament elections, but also using sexual innuendo in her various campaign slogans (Miroiu, 2015, p. 100).

Macovei (born 1959) is perhaps one of the best-known politicians outside Romania. She entered politics in 2004, appointed by then-President Băsescu at the helm of Ministry of Justice (2004–2007). Macovei profiled herself as a champion of the rule of law and positioned herself at the frontline of anti-corruption, winning international praise for doing so. She joined PDL in 2009 and won a MEP mandate in the EU Parliament elections that year. At EU level, Macovei juxtaposed her fervent anti-Communism, which consolidated her political profile in Romania, against socialist appeals for rapprochement with the Russian Federation, which she was vehemently opposed to. In the 2014 EU Parliament elections, Macovei was one of the few women candidates to run a negative campaign against her center-left counter-candidates (Branea, 2017, p. 139), equating a vote for the Romanian Social-Democrats with a vote for a pro-Russian President of the European Commission, thus “against the country’s own interests”. Having won another mandate, Macovei left PDL and EPP, to found her own party M10. She later allied M10 with the group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which unites conservative and Eurosceptic parties, such as the Conservative and Unionist Party (UK), and right-wing populist parties, such as the (True) Finns Party (Finland). Despite her MEP mandate, Macovei ran in the 2014 Presidential elections as an independent candidate on a conservative platform that was “unfriendly to equal opportunities, and [with] a clear preference for the rule of law but not for social justice” (Miroiu, 2015, p. 100). Although lacking a party machine to support her, Macovei came in fifth with 4.4% of the votes (see Table 3). Faithful to her conservative agenda, she too encouraged her supporters to vote for Johannis in the runoff. Macovei is divorced and has one son.

## 6. Discursive Performances of Gender on Facebook

The discursive performances of gender centered on idealized motherhood are most clearly articulated in Dúró's posts, which define her politically, and blur the distinction between private and public. This echoes similar trends with instances of right-wing populism elsewhere in Europe (Meret, 2015). Even when motherhood itself

is not central, there are numerous references to the importance of the traditional family, and women's role in preserving its values and passing them on to future generations. For instance, discussing the challenges of having three young children, Dúró mentions that, besides the grandparents actively caretaking for their grandchildren, her daughter Hunóra has precociously showed interest in nurturing her younger siblings (post with 1200 Likes, 20 Shares and 55 Comments<sup>2</sup>). In another post, Dúró reacts vehemently to the 2014 Eurovision winner Conchita Wurst, proclaiming the timeliness for JOBBIK's social policies aimed at consolidating the “family-based social organization, and nurturing national traditions” (post with 470 Likes; 80 Shares; 25 Comments<sup>3</sup>). Significantly more restrained, as evinced by the limited number of posts, Gáll-Pelcz confirms her conservative credentials as a good mother and wife, celebrating her wedding anniversary in the company of her husband and their daughters (post with 750 Likes; 20 Shares; 60 Comments<sup>4</sup>). She echoes FIDESZ's demographic preoccupations, by talking appreciatively about a woman's mothering of numerous offspring, concluding in religious tones that motherhood is a godly blessing (post with 371 Likes; 6 Shares; 10 Comments<sup>5</sup>). Having no children, Udrea is the most subdued amongst the analyzed politicians with references to motherhood. In turn, she takes pictures with children (post with 4500 Likes; and 105 Comments<sup>6</sup>), and discusses the importance of traditions and moral values, arguing that the traditional family is “the pillar of Romanian society” (post with 2080 Likes; 150 Shares; and 78 Comments<sup>7</sup>). Motherhood does not take center stage in Macovei's discursive performance of gender either, though she mentions “the trinity of Romanian nation, Orthodox religion and morality, and traditional family.” Unlike Dúró, she maintains a certain separation between private and public life: references to her being a mother are very rare and mostly indirect (4 posts during the analyzed period), such as posting the birthday greetings received from her son (post with 16870 Likes; 502 Shares; 450 Comments<sup>8</sup>). Attempting a more personal approach, however, Macovei focuses on her relationship with her cat, Dubi (post with 3540 Likes; 135 Shares; 175 Comments<sup>9</sup>).

When it comes to the discursive performances of gender that detail the ideal of feminine toughness, the situation is somewhat different. Macovei's posts contour most clearly with this ideal, and are in stark contrast to Dúró's extensive performance of motherhood. Interestingly, Macovei rarely mentions being a woman, or a mother herself; instead, she performs an almost gender-blind professional ideal of the hardworking individual,

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/durodora/photos/a.743964055639463.1073741834.191946490841225/807835052585696/?type=3&theater>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/durodora/posts/699069860128883?match=c3pha80hbGxhcXZFrIG11dGF0dGE%3D>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/photos/a.206701452863821.1073741829.194170724116894/269129426621023/?type=3>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/posts/242120095988623?match=bWEgYSAxMSBneWVybWVrZXMGZXRlbGvDoW7DoWw%3D>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ElenaBasescuOficial/photos/a.546312515458289.1073741849.430856153670593/591071704315703/?type=3>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/photos/a.10150113418889584.283864.349853434583/10152236957199584/?type=3>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/a.330775430350974.73077.130380413723811/706673709427809/?type=3>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/a.330775430350974.73077.130380413723811/618288461599668/?type=3>



fighting singlehandedly and stubbornly against corruption (post with 5700 Likes; 700 Shares; 290 Comments<sup>10</sup>). Nonetheless, Macovei dismisses the pervasive misogyny in Romanian society. She uses a conservative way of reasoning, arguing that since women acquire extensive management skills by maintaining their family households, they may use these skills when engaging in politics (post with 1439 Likes; 156 Shares; 298 Comments<sup>11</sup>). She positions herself as the “mother of National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA)”, which suggests a substitute for her biological motherhood (post with 240 Likes; 50 Shares; 5 Comments<sup>12</sup>), or encourages comparisons between herself and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the account that they both embody good professional women, with a strong character and will, but also capable of (feminine) warmth. Gáll-Pelcz, on the other hand, contours the ideal of a professional woman with a profound knowledge and engagement in women’s issues, understood in a conservative key to pertain to balancing between family life, and some sort of participation on the labor market (post with 324 Likes; 34 Shares; 7 Comments<sup>13</sup>). Intriguingly, Udrea’s discursive performance of gender appropriates the ideal of feminine toughness by fusing conservative discourse—women as social glue, maintaining the traditional family, and Romanian values and spirituality—with feminist stances against women’s discrimination (post with 6300 Likes; 340 Shares; and 460 Likes<sup>14</sup>); positive examples of women fighting traditionalism—such as Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, and socialist politician Dilma Rousseff; and glimpses of her own personal life. Unlike Macovei, Udrea emphasizes her physical attributes, skillfully using to her advantage the slanderous insinuations of her being Băsescu’s lover. This is candidly illustrated by comments on one of her photos that the awkward position she was in was due to her arranging her bra (post with 2750 Likes; 180 Shares; and 270 Comments<sup>15</sup>). In general, Udrea argues in her posts that beauty, modernity, and youthfulness are the paramount values for PMP and her presidential campaign, which had the motto “For a beautiful Romania!” (post with 3730 Likes; 450 Shares; and 775 Comments<sup>16</sup>).

## 7. Conclusions

Whilst Hungary and Romania have the lowest levels of women’s political participation in the EU, and parties on the conservative right ideological continuum relate somewhat differently to the feminist project, the analysis of them is significant to the extant scholarship on gender and conservatism. For example, in Hungary, both FIDESZ and JOBBIK position themselves against the feminist project. In a context of strong demographic anxieties,

they fuse social conservatism with exclusionary nationalism in ways that cement traditional gender roles and emphasize normative heterosexuality. In Romania, in turn, PMP and M10 are more ambiguous, blending outright opposition to the feminist project with instrumental efforts to reinterpret traditional gender roles that emanate from neoliberal anti-welfare attitudes.

Corroborating these with the discursive performances of gender (summarized in Table 4), and the significant gap in the level of visibility between the women politicians in Hungary and in Romania, three key conclusions are discerned. First, the predominance of motherhood performances fortifies the political profiles of Gáll-Pelcz and Dúró as committed representatives of what are generally regarded as feminine “soft issues” in the masculine “hard” political competition. To varying degrees, both Hungarian politicians merely reiterate the conservative ideological expectations about women’s traditional gender roles, even on social media (Celis & Childs, 2018; Childs & Webb, 2012; Gibson & Heyse, 2010). However, they do this in quite different ways. Dúró for example, uses her motherhood instrumentally to achieve greater political visibility, whilst Macovei and Udrea attempt to widen their repertoire of discursive performances of gender. They for instance, navigate between women’s traditional gender roles that emphasize familial and maternal instincts, and those that stress feminine toughness (Schreiber, 2016), albeit with only sporadic and contradictory attempts to recast women’s position as a tolerated presence in the political arena. In a few instances, there were other performances of gender, such as the almost gender-blind neoliberal professional, which appears to be the most extreme interpretation of “true liberation”.

Secondly, the most clearly antifeminist conceptions on the conservative right continuum, those that are underpinned by traditional family values, are espoused by the right-wing populist parties. In this case, women politicians employ various iterations of the motherhood ideal, but as Dúró exemplifies, this may be used instrumentally to construct a political career. In other words, it is not only the different cultural contexts in Hungary and Romania that enable specific discursive performances of gender, but also the ideological context into which these women embed their political activity in these countries. On the other hand, women’s “true liberation” builds on the ideal of feminine toughness, but *in extremis* it dismisses feminist contestations about women’s underrepresentation in politics by simply erasing their gender. However, selecting four women politicians, and analyzing their official Facebook profiles in 2014, the article offers a snapshot, albeit a revealing one, of these complex issues.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/a.330775430350974.73077.130380413723811/705629052865608/?type=3>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/130380413723811/posts/660444824050698>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/pb.130380413723811.-2207520000.1464168783./703467069748473/?type=3&theater>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/posts/303210239879608?match=a2VkdmlVzIG7FkXTDoXJzYW0%3D>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/photos/a.10150113418889584.283864.349853434583/10152091854719584/?type=3>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/photos/a.10150113418889584.283864.349853434583/10152562229034584/?type=3&theater>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/videos/10152543752774584/>

**Table 4.** Facebook posts—Summary of analysis.

Politicians	Performance of gender	Motherhood	Feminine toughness
Ilidkó Gáll-Pelcz		Well-contoured	Contoured on women's issues
Dóra Dúró		Strong contours	Subdued
Elena Udrea		Subdued substitute	Well-contoured, though contradictory
Monica Macovei		Subdued	Strong contours

Thirdly, the combination of DHA and social media analysis sheds light on the way Facebook bridges the divisions between the ideological constraints about gender roles specific to the conservative right continuum, and to women's empowerment in politics. Further research could explore comparatively and, in more detail, how these conservative ideals (Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Schreiber, 2016) are faithfully performed, resisted, contested, or even replaced by women politicians (Celis & Childs, 2018; Celis & Erzeel, 2015; Childs & Webb, 2012). Further, and arguably more significant, is the new research opportunities social media allows, and how the discursive performances of gender articulate resistance to, or offer a reinterpretation of, the feminist project.

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